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ABSTRACT

The hypothesis that women with eating disorders are ambivalent about being female has not been directly tested, but a great deal of evidence has been found in support of the relationship between achievement, body preferences, and disordered eating. Three hundred and one women attending the State University at New York, Stony Brook were surveyed about their eating, and the attitudes and behaviors of their parents. Frequent bingers reported a greater decrease in paternal concern with their academic achievement during adolescence than did other women. No significant differences were found in analyses of maternal concern with academic achievement during childhood and adolescence or in analyses comparing women who reported purging with non-purging women. The results of this study are best explained by the theory that disordered eating is produced among those women who attempt to gain self-respect and the respect of others through achieving intellectually and professionally, and who come to feel that in our society being female puts them at a disadvantage in these areas. (24 references) (LLL)

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Disordered eating and decreased parental attention during adolescence to female academic achievement

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Running head: Adolescent eating disorders

Paper presented at the 98th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association, August 8, 1990.

College women reported on their perceptions of how concerned each of their parents were with the women's academic achievement during their childhoods and adolescences. Frequent bingers reported a greater decrease in paternal concern with their academic achievement during adolescence than did other women. No significant differences were found in analyses of maternal concern with academic achievement during childhood and adolescence or in analyses comparing women who reported purging with non-purging women. The relationship between bingeing and changes in reported paternal concern with academic achievement was significant for women whose mothers did not attend college but not for women whose mothers did attend college and was significant for women who had no brothers but not for women who had brothers.

Much attention has recently been given to the prevalence of eating disorders among women, with particular emphasis on the relationship between sex roles and eating disorders (Chernin, 1981, 1985; Sitnick & Katz, 1984; Srikameswaran, Leichner & Harper, 1984; Lewis & Johnson, 1985; Swartz, 1985; Heilbrun & Putter, 1986; Timko, Striegel-Moore, Silberstein & Rodin, 1987; Pettinati, Franks, Wade and Kogan, 1987.) Although most of this work has been relatively atheoretical, some theories about the relationship have been suggested. One theory (Silverstein, Perdue, Peterson, Vogel & Fantini, 1986; Silverstein, Perdue, Wolf & Pizzolo, 1988) hypothesizes that some females strive to achieve academically and professionally but come to feel that being female puts them at a disadvantage in attaining their goals and develop ambivalence toward their gender and toward the feminine bodies that define them as female. According to this theory, disordered eating is a manifestation of this ambivalence toward their female physiques.

To date, the hypothesis that women with eating disorders are ambivalent about being female has not been directly tested, but a great deal of evidence has been found in support of the relationship between achievement, body preferences, and disordered eating. Several studies on physique preferences among females have pointed to the importance of issues of female achievement. In an experimental study, Kleinke and Staneski (1980) found that having a large bust leads women to be considered unintelligent and incompetent. Using silhouettes of figures, Beck, Ward-Hull & McLear (1976) found that women who prefer smaller breasts are those who choose careers often thought to be traditionally appropriate for males and women who prefer smaller buttocks tend to desire to achieve academically. Hawkins, Turell and Jackson (1983) found that women who are dissatisfied with their figures tend to be concerned about the reactions of other people to their achievement efforts. Silverstein, Perdue, Peterson, Vogel & Fantini (1986) found a significant negative

relationship between how slim women want to be and how intelligent they believe that their fathers thought they (i.e. the respondents) were as adolescents. They also found that over the course of the 20th century, when the proportion of American women attending college or working in professional jobs increased, the models appearing in women's magazines became less curvaceous.

Recent work on the history of disordered eating has also implicated issues of female achievement. Silverstein & Perlick (1987) found, in an investigation of medical literature and case histories, that for thousands of years, young women have suffered from disorders that include some combination of anorexia, bulimia, vomiting, amenorrea and distaste for or fear of female curvaceousness. These women were included among those given a variety of diagnoses (depending upon the diagnoses that were being widely used during each period) including hysteria, neurasthenia, chlorosis, consumption and amenorrea. In almost every case, some medical authorities, describing the syndromes or writing up case histories of women suffering from them, noted that the women were striving for intellectual/academic achievement.

Using a multiple regression procedure, Silverstein and Perdue (1988) found that the extent of purging reported by college women was not significantly related to the importance they placed upon attractiveness, but was significantly related to the importance they placed upon professional success for women, while the extent of underweight was significantly related to the importance they placed upon women's intelligence. Stern, Dixon, Jones, Lake, Nemzer and Sansone (1989) distributed the Family Environment Scale to women suffering from eating disorders, non-disordered women and to the parents of both groups of women. They found that bulimic subjects as well as their parents rated their families as significantly higher on achievement

orientation than did the control subjects and their parents. Kagan and Squires (1983) found feelings of failure in adolescents to be significantly correlated with dieting and compulsive eating. Rost, Neuhaus and Florin (1982) found that, compared to a control group, bulimarexic women scored higher on a scale of sex role "fatalism", which included such items as "Men simply have more possibilities than women" and "My professional advancement is controlled by the fact that I am a woman." Silverstein, Perdue, Wolf and Pizzolo (1988) found that eating disorders were particularly prevalent among women who reported that their parents held attitudes negative toward female achievement including either parent believing that "a woman's place is in the home", or fathers believing that the women's mothers were unintelligent, or mothers being dissatisfied with their career choices.

One aspect of the relationship between achievement and eating disorders remains to be explained by this theory. That is, if eating disorders result when women who strive to achieve intellectually and professionally come to feel that being female is a disadvantage, why is it that many case histories of women suffering from eating disorders point out that the parents, particularly the fathers, of the women were quite proud of the intellectual achievements of their daughters when they were young girls (e.g. Bruch, 1978)?

One possible resolution of this apparent contradiction focuses on changes that occur during adolescence. That is, not only is adolescence the time when the bodies of girls develop the breasts, curves, pubic hair, and menstruation that signify womanhood and when eating disorders appear, but it is also a time when concern with sex roles and the experience of gender-related role expectations are particularly intense (Urberg, 1979; Hill & Lynch, 1983; Galambos, Petersen, Richards & Gitelson, 1985.)

It may be that some women who strive to achieve intellectually and professionally become particularly sensitive during adolescence to indications

that women are considered to be less likely to achieve and less capable of achieving academically and professionally than are men. Perhaps some women with eating disorders become aware at adolescence that notwithstanding the pride that their parents felt regarding their earlier achievements, women are still expected to achieve less academically and professionally than are men. It may even be that these women perceive that when they reached adolescence the treatment that they received from their parents became more gender-stereotyped and that their parents actually began to place less emphasis on their academic achievement.

This study was designed to test the hypothesis that women suffering from eating disorders are more likely than are other women to believe that their parents became less concerned with their academic achievement when the women reached adolescence. A secondary hypothesis concerned differential effects of perceived paternal and maternal attitudes. Previous studies have reported that women's perceptions of their fathers' reactions to their intelligence are significantly related to how slim the women wish to be (Silverstein, Perdue, et al. 1986) and to the prevalence of frequent bingeing among the women (Silverstein, Perdue, et al., 1988). These variables were not significantly related to the women's perceptions of their mothers' reactions to their intelligence. Therefore, we predicted that the first hypothesis would be true for the women's beliefs regarding changes during adolescence in their fathers', but not in their mothers', concern for the women's academic achievement.

Method

Three hundred and one women attending the State University of New York at Stony Brook filled out a questionnaire that included questions regarding their eating and the attitudes and behaviors of their parents. (The same data base

was used in the analyses presented by Silverstein, Perdue, et al. 1988.) As the sample being studied was nonclinical, we followed the previously used practice (Silverstein and Perdue, 1988; Silverstein, Perdue et al., 1988) of measuring eating problems using single questions regarding individual symptoms. To measure bingeing, we asked the respondents to use a scale ranging from "1 = Never" to "7 = More than once a day" to indicate how often they eat uncontrollably to the point of stuffing themselves. Frequent bingers were defined as those respondents who answered this question with a 5 (three to six times a week) or greater. To measure purgeing, we asked them to use the same scale to indicate how often they intentionally vomit after eating and how often they use laxatives or diuretics to control their weight. In order to maximize the relatively small number of respondents who report purgeing, we were forced to define as purgers any women who reported engaging in any of these behaviors.

To measure the changes experienced by the respondents in the gender-role expectations of their parents, we asked each respondent to use a Likert scale ranging from "1 = Not at all" to "5 = Extremely" to indicate how much each parent cared about the respondents' academic achievement. Respondents also used the same scale to indicate how close they were with each parent. At one point in the questionnaire, respondents answered these questions with reference to their childhoods, ages four-to-twelve. Later in the questionnaire, the respondents answered the same questions referring to their adolescences, ages 13-to-17.

All of the analyses used in this study compared the reports of eating-disordered women and non-disordered women regarding interactions with parents during the respondents' childhoods and adolescences. Tests of the basic hypothesis were made using a two-way analysis of variance. When a two (eating-disordered women versus other women) by two (repeated measures on

reports of father's or mother's concern with the respondent's academic achievement during childhood and during adolescence) analysis of variance was performed, the hypothesis predicted a significant interaction in which the eating disordered women should exhibit greater (negative) differences between childhood and adolescence than the non-disordered women.

Results

When all subjects were included in the analysis, the interaction term of the analysis of variance comparing reports of father's concern with respondents' academic achievement in childhood and adolescence between women who reported bingeing frequently and those who did not was not significant ($F = 0.73$) This lack of a significant interaction in an analysis that includes all subjects is not surprising. Using the same data base, Silverstein, Perdue, et al. (1988) found that frequent bingers were significantly more likely than other women to report that when the women were children, their parents held attitudes that were negative toward women's achievement. These included their fathers and mothers believing that "a woman's place is in the home", their fathers believing that their wives (the respondents' mothers) were not intelligent, and their mothers being dissatisfied with their own career choices.

That is, there may be two separate mechanisms whereby perceived parental attitudes toward female achievement lead to eating disorders: One in which these attitudes are apparent during childhood and one in which they do not appear, or are not perceived, until adolescence. A fair test of the effect of changes during adolescence cannot be made if women affected by childhood sexism are lumped together in the eating-disordered group with those affected by changes during adolescence. In order to determine if some subset of eating-disordered women is affected by perceived changes in parental attitudes

toward female achievement during adolescence, it is necessary to take into account another subset of eating-disordered women who are affected by perceived parental attitudes during childhood and thus do not necessarily exhibit much change in perceived parental attitudes from childhood to adolescence.

There are two methods available for removing the effect of the women who perceived sexist attitudes during childhood from our analysis of the effects of changes during adolescence. First, using an analysis of covariance, we can statistically partial out the effects of perceived attitudes during childhood from the effects of perceived attitudes during adolescence. An analysis of covariance in which the perceived paternal concern for achievement during adolescence of women who reported frequent bingeing was compared with that of other women with perceived paternal concern for achievement during childhood entered as a covariate was significant ($F = 8.44$, $p = .004$). That is, when the variance accounted for by paternal attitudes during childhood is taken out, frequent bingeing is significantly related to perceived paternal concern for achievement during adolescence.

A second method for removing the effects of the childhood sexism group from our analysis of changes during adolescence is less elegant statistically than is the analysis of covariance, but it does allow for a clearer understanding of the processes under study. That is, we can use the original two-way analysis of variance after first eliminating the data of those women who were affected at an earlier age by parental attitudes toward female achievement. In order to select these women, we used the variables relating to parental attitudes during the respondents' childhoods that were found to predict disordered eating by Silverstein, Perdue, et al. (1988).

When the 11 frequent bingers and 35 other women who reported that when they were children their fathers did not believe that the respondents' mothers

were (at least moderately) intelligent were eliminated from the analysis, the interaction term of the analysis of variance was significant. As shown in Table 1, the frequent bingers reported a mean decrease from childhood to adolescence in their fathers' concern with their academic achievement (0.6) that was three times as large as the decrease (0.2) reported by the other women.

Place Table 1 About Here

The same results occured when the 149 women who reported that their fathers agreed (at least moderately) that "a woman's place is in the home" or when the 103 women who reported the same for their mothers were eliminated from the analyses. (The pattern of results for all of the analyses when either of these groups of respondents was eliminated was exactly the same as when the women who reported that their fathers did not believe the respondents' mothers to be intelligent were eliminated. As the latter group was smaller and therefore left more respondents in the analysis after they were eliminated, we will not continue to report the results of analyses in which the women who reported that their fathers or mothers believed "a woman's place is in the home" were eliminated. The analyses in which we eliminated women who reported that when they were children their mothers were not satisfied with their own career choices stand in fascinating contrast to the other analyses and will be discussed below.)

In contrast to the results of the analyses of reports of fathers' concern with the academic achievement of the frequent bingers versus other women during the respondents' childhoods and adolescences, none of the analyses of the respondents' reports of their mothers' concern with their academic achievement during childhood and adolescence resulted in a significant

interaction term of the analysis of variance. This was true whether we analyzed all of the data or eliminated the data of respondents in any of the ways described above. As in the earlier studies, women's perceptions of their fathers' reactions to their achievement predicted disordered eating whereas their perceptions of their mothers' reactions did not.

In order to determine whether the measure of fathers' concern with academic achievement was really tapping a more general change in the relationship between the respondents and their fathers, the same analyses were performed on the women's reports of how close to their fathers they were in childhood and in adolescence. In none of these analyses was the interaction term of the analysis of variance significant. At this time, we must conclude that frequent bingeing is related specifically to perceived changes in fathers' concern for achievement.

The same analyses were also performed comparing women who reported purging by means of laxatives, diuretics or self-induced vomiting to control their weight with women who did not report engaging in any purging behavior. None of these analyses (including additional analyses in which the frequent bingers were eliminated) were significant. Purging may be related to reports of some parental attitudes toward achievement (see Silverstein, Perdue, et al. 1988) but it does not appear to be related to reports of changes from childhood to adolescence in parental concern for academic achievement.

The other variable dealing with parental attitudes relevant to female achievement that Silverstein, Perdue, et al. (1988) found to be significantly related to frequent bingeing was how satisfied the respondents' mothers were (during the respondents' childhoods) with their own career choices. The interaction term of the analysis of variance comparing the reports of frequent bingers and other women regarding their fathers' concern with their academic

achievement during childhood and adolescence was not significant when we eliminated from the analysis the 77 women who reported that their mothers were not (at least moderately) satisfied with their own career choices. Because this result was so different from the analyses discussed above, we wondered whether the mothers' level of achievement played an important role in the process whereby changes in fathers' concern with their daughters' academic achievement lead to eating disorders.

To explore this possibility, after eliminating the respondents who reported that during the women's childhoods their fathers did not believe that their wives were intelligent, we divided the remaining respondents into the 132 whose mothers did not attend college and the 123 whose mothers did attend college. We ran on both groups the two way analysis of variance comparing frequent bingers versus other women on fathers' concern with academic achievement during childhood and adolescence. As shown in Table 2, whereas the interaction term was significant for the women whose mothers did not attend college, it did not approach significance for the women whose mothers did attend college. It may be that a decrease in fathers' concern with academic achievement during adolescence only leads to bingeing if mothers were relatively low achievers academically or professionally. On the other hand, while the data of the women whose mothers did attend college or of those whose mothers were satisfied with their own career choices were not significant, they were clearly in the same direction as those of the other women. That is, compared to the non-bingers, the bingers reported a larger drop from childhood to adolescence in fathers' concern with their academic achievement. As a result, we believe that more research is needed before strong conclusions can be drawn regarding the mediating effect of mother's level of achievement.

Place Table 2 About Here

Silverstein, Perdue, et al. (1988) found that frequent bingers were more likely than other women to come from families in which there were no brothers. They speculated that in families with no boys, the intellectual achievements of women were particularly likely to receive attention when the women were children but that in some of these families the attention would markedly decrease when the women reached adolescence, perhaps precipitating disordered eating. In order to test this explanation of the high rate of frequent bingeing among women without brothers, after eliminating the respondents who reported that during the women's childhoods their fathers did not believe that their wives were intelligent, we divided the remaining respondents into the 178 who had brothers while they were growing up and the 76 who did not. As shown in Table 3, whereas the interaction term of the analysis of variance comparing frequent bingers with other women on paternal concern with academic achievement in childhood and adolescence was significant for the women who had no brothers, it did not approach significance for the women who had brothers.

Place Table 3 About Here

While the explanation of the effect on bingeing of having no brothers put forth by Silverstein, Perdue, et al. (1988) is consistent with this pattern of significance levels in the two analyses, the explanation is not consistent with the pattern of mean scores on perceived paternal concern for academic achievement. Whereas Silverstein, Perdue, et al. speculated that the intellectual achievements of women who grow up in families with no boys would be particularly likely to receive attention when the women were children, the mean reported paternal concern with academic achievement during childhood is no higher among the women from families with no brothers than it is among the women from families with brothers. More research is needed before we fully

understand this intriguing difference between women who have brothers and those who do not.

Discussion

Before we discuss the implications of these findings, it is important to point out the limitations that are placed upon conclusions that can be drawn from retrospective, self-report data (Halverson, 1988.) While we tend to believe that the fathers of the frequent bingers in our sample actually reacted differently when their daughters reached adolescence than did the fathers of the other women, our data cannot prove this hypothesis. We can only conclude that at the time they were surveyed, the two groups of women remembered their fathers as having reacted differently.

Nonetheless, these data provide additional support for the importance of reactions to female achievement in precipitating disordered eating as well as providing empirical evidence of the role in the process played by changes experienced by women during adolescence. We believe that the results of this study and the earlier ones are best explained by the theory that disordered eating is produced among those women who attempt to gain self-respect and the respect of others through achieving intellectually and professionally and who come to feel that in our society being female puts them at a disadvantage in these areas. (Reactions to other areas of accomplishment that are highly esteemed by members of our society and in which women are thought by many people to be less capable than men may also have similar effects. But, because academic achievement during childhood and professional achievement during adulthood are so widely esteemed, reactions to women's achievements in these areas probably affect many more women than do reactions to achievements in other areas.) We hypothesize that these women come to feel ambivalently about the femaleness that appears to place limitations upon them. As female status is assigned based upon physical attributes, the ambivalence might

become focussed upon their female bodies. And one way to minimize or disguise these female bodily characteristics, such as curves and menstruation, is through disordered eating.

This explanation becomes particularly interesting in the light of the focus on developmental change during adolescence, for all three aspects of the theory -- female bodies, eating problems, and gender roles -- exhibit distinct changes during adolescence. Female bodies change from a childish form that is quite similar to that of young boys to an adult form that is fairly distinct from that of adult males. Symptoms of eating problems become much more prevalent. And gender roles become particularly important and, in some cases, particularly restrictive during adolescence. The results of this study indicate that among a sample of college women, self-reported changes in the latter two areas may be related.

These findings not only help to explain why disordered eating is particularly likely to develop during adolescence, they may also help to explain why outbreaks of disordered eating tend to occur during periods of history when women are encouraged to achieve academically and professionally (Silverstein, Perdue, Peterson, Vogel & Fantini, 1986; Silverstein and Perlick, 1987.) It may be that during these periods women receive encouragement for their intellectual achievement when they are children but then sense when they reach adolescence that being female is still a disadvantage. The role played by the achievement levels of mothers is particularly interesting here given that eating disorders are prevalent in generations of women who strive for achievement but whose mothers were not encouraged to do the same.

Several aspects of this explanation of disordered eating need further work. It is not clear why some variables related to achievement significantly

predict such symptoms of disordered eating as being underweight or engaging in purging (Silverstein and Perdue, 1988; Silverstein, Perdue, et al., 1988) while others, such as the changes in paternal concern with academic achievement during adolescence that were measured here, predict frequent bingeing but not purging. Also, the differential effects of paternal and maternal reactions to the achievement of women with eating disorders must be further investigated. Finally, and most crucially, the theory assumes that issues around female achievement lead to disordered eating by causing some women to feel ambivalence toward their femininity and toward their female physiques. This gender ambivalence has not been directly measured. Until it is, the theory cannot be considered to be fully supported.

To date, work in the area of gender roles and eating disorders has been relatively atheoretical, often simply comparing the levels of disordered eating or bodily dissatisfaction exhibited by males and females or by females who are categorized differently on standard sex role inventories. This work and the research in which eating-disordered women are compared to control groups on a variety of psychometric measures has been useful in generating a body of data that can be used to derive hypotheses of the causes of disordered eating. We would hope that future work in the area will increasingly come to test such hypotheses and to pit various theoretical explanations of the problem against one another. And we believe that any theory that is developed to explain the prevalence of eating disorders among women will have to be able to account for the relationship between disordered eating and issues of female achievement that has now been reported in a wide range of studies that have used very different measures and methods.

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Table 1

Mean Reported Paternal Concern for Respondents' Academic Achievement During Childhood and Adolescence of Frequent Bingers and Other Women*

	Stage	
	Childhood	Adolescence
Frequent Bingers (n = 27)	4.3	3.7
Other Women (n = 228)	4.2	4.0

Analysis of Variance

	F	p
Group	0.44	.51
Stage	18.29	.000
Interaction	5.00	.026

*Does not include 46 respondents who reported that during the respondents' childhoods, their fathers did not consider the respondents' mothers to be intelligent

Table 2

Mean Reported Paternal Concern for Respondents' Academic Achievement During Childhood and Adolescence of Frequent Bingers and Other Women Whose Mothers Attended College and Whose Mother Did Not Attend College*

	Respondents Whose Mothers:			
	Did Not Attend College		Did Attend College	
	Stage		Stage	
	Childhood	Adolescence	Childhood	Adolescence
Frequent Bingers	4.2	3.5	4.5	3.9
	(n = 14)		(n = 13)	
Group				
Other Women	4.1	4.0	4.3	4.1
	(n = 118)		(n = 110)	

Analyses of Variance

	Did Not Attend College		Did Attend College	
	F	p	F	p
Group	0.44	.51	0.01	.92
Stage	18.29	.000	7.60	.007
Interaction	5.00	.026	1.25	.265

*Does not include 46 respondents who reported that during the respondents' childhoods, their fathers did not consider the respondents' mothers to be intelligent

Table 3

Mean Reported Paternal Concern for Respondents' Academic Achievement During Childhood and Adolescence of Frequent Bingers and Other Women Who Had Brothers and Who Did Not Have Brothers*

	Respondents Who:			
	Did Not Have Brothers		Had Brothers	
	Stage		Stage	
	Childhood	Adolescence	Childhood	Adolescence
Group				
Frequent Bingers	4.3 (n = 13)	3.5	4.4 (n = 14)	3.9
Other Women	4.2 (n = 63)	4.1	4.3 (n = 164)	4.0

Analyses of Variance

	Did Not Have Brothers		Had Brothers	
	F	p	F	p
Group	0.67	.42	0.01	.91
Stage	9.29	.003	7.56	.007
Interaction	5.19	.026	1.02	.315

*Does not include 46 respondents who reported that during the respondents' childhoods, their fathers did not consider the respondents' mothers to be intelligent